

## Future Log File 2014

### **Clemens Tesch-Römer – Berlin, Germany**

Professor Tesch-Römer is director of the German Centre of Gerontology and works on social relations/social integration of older persons and intergenerational family solidarity and societal solidarity.

**Keynes once said: "... the idea of the future being different from the present is so repugnant to our conventional modes of thought and behaviour that we, most of us, offer a great resistance to acting on it in practice." Is he right? Why (not)?**

As human beings we live not only in the present, but also in the future, especially when we are young. We have goals, anticipate positive situations and fear negative events in the future. This mostly relates to our own personal life. But we also like to think about the future in general. The science fiction genre is just one example: Jules Verne, Isaac Asimov, and Stanislaw Lem imagined a future quite different from their times – and they had (and still have) a good number of readers. Hence, I wouldn't follow Keynes here. But how do we know what the future will look like? Although we are not sure what will happen in the future, we are aware of erroneous predictions by visionaries, fortune tellers and scientific forecasters. What surprises me the most is the ease and speed of adapting to the ever changing present. Looking back we realize how different the present is compared to the past. My answer to Keynes would be: Look, we coped with this future – and I guess we will manage the coming future, too.

**What do you think are the most relevant developments which will change our world in the next two, three decades?**

There are a variety of global developments which will change our world in the next decades and new developments might emerge in the future which I am not aware of now. Today, the most important developments are climate change and its consequences like storms, floods, and draughts, regional military conflicts, regional and global migration and demographic change which consists of both growing and shrinking populations in different regions of the world. The strongest force behind these developments is worldwide inequality in respect to societal wealth, individual living conditions, and sustainable production. There are also hopeful trends, however, like technological innovation, especially in information technology, which might help to cope with those challenges.

**What about demographic change?**

Demographic change and ageing, my own field of expertise, seems to follow societal wealth. Only when societies reach a certain level of wealth, including education and gender equality, longevity increases and birth rates decrease. However, we can observe that Western developed societies grew old after they became rich, while nowadays developing countries are growing old before they had the chance to become rich. Hence, demographic change adds to the problems of worldwide inequality. In addition, demographic change has its own dynamic and creates a variety of challenges. Triggered by demographic change we have to deal with the questions how to reach intergenerational fairness, how to foster economic innovation and productivity with an ageing workforce, and how to maintain sustainable and effective social security, health, and long-term care systems.

### **Are you afraid of them or do you think positively?**

My hope is that peaceful economic, scientific and cultural exchange between nations will lead to fair living conditions globally. Free speech, access to information, and democracy are fundamental to make this exchange productive. We have to take care that information technology will foster democracy, which is apparently not as easy as we innocently believed in the early days of the internet. In respect to demographic change, my hope is that longevity is paired with better health in the future. This means that we will be able to stay economically active for longer and might become frail later in life. This will happen if health and social policy by both governments and companies encourage healthy working and living conditions, and if all of us are aware that our own decisions might influence our chances for active ageing. However, also in the future we will have the task to care for those of us who will spend the end of life in frailty and need of care. So thinking positively about the future may help to shape societal developments accordingly.

### **Where will the happiest people live on the globe in the year 2040? Why there?**

Answering this question on a global level, we have to look at societies (and, hence, ask for average, not individual happiness). We already know that societal happiness has several sources: Good material living conditions, democratic institutions and cultural values which foster life satisfaction. Wealthier nations are on average happier than poorer nations. However, there is also variance: Some nations have lower happiness scores than the ones predicted by their wealth (Japan and Germany are examples), other have higher happiness scores (like China). Hence, it is not only the wealth we accumulate, but also our values and world views which help us to be happy. My guess would be that the happiness rank order of nations in 2040 will be similar as today: Rich democratic countries with an easy-going culture, e.g. European Nordic countries like Sweden and Norway will belong to the happiest nations.

### **Which book do you think will still be worth reading then? What could future generations still learn from it?**

Let me answer this last question first in general, and then somewhat more personal. First the general answer: In my view it is absolutely necessary to be informed about history. We understand the presence much better when we know about historical trajectories in the past. This is true also for science, and we should read more often early contributions to philosophy, psychology, sociology, demography, political science, and literature. And then a personal answer: I think that there is much to learn about the human life course by reading Thomas Mann's novel "Buddenbrooks". We learn about the life course (the main characters develop, grow older and die), about intergenerational relations, solidarity and conflict, about social change (the Buddenbrook family will cease to exist in the end, as well as the culture of Hanseatic merchants), and about social inequality (although the story is set in the upper class, societal tensions are underlying forces which drive the story forward). And there are many more books which are worth reading today and in the future. Today we are in the unique situation to combine the European tradition with the literatures from Asia, Africa, and the Americas.